POVERTY BAROMETER

No Holiday from Poverty for Children in Care

July 2002

Adolescence can be a particularly difficult and vulnerable time for youth and his or her family. It is a time when the majority of youth are achieving some degree of independence from their adult caregivers.

This is an especially difficult time for children who are in the care of Child and Family Services. Through legislation, the Manitoba government is responsible for the Child and Family Services system, which provides a variety of services to families, including direct services for abused and neglected children. When a child's safety cannot be secured, Child and Family Services agencies can decide, based upon the best interests of the child, to remove the child from the family unit and place him or her in out-of-home care.

Children who become involved with the Child and Family Services system more often than not begin adult life as the poorest of the poor. Once a youth reaches the age of 18, in most instances, Child and Family Services withdraw their involvement and youth are required to become independent, regardless of how prepared they are to manage their own affairs. They have few financial resources other than welfare to back them up, and most often, no family support.

As of March 31, 2001 there were 805 youth in the Manitoba child welfare system that were 16 years of age or older[1]. A majority of these youth will exit care prior to or upon reaching the age of 18.

INDEPENDENT LIVING – Youth in Care at Disadvantage

Poverty

Poverty is a very real disadvantage for youth attempting to transition from care. The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) found that poor teens are more likely to live in substandard housing, have a higher rate of adolescent pregnancy, and be at greater risk of poor physical health.[2]

Twenty-five percent of former youth in care receive some form of public assistance.[3] The income received through public assistance declines once a youth turns 18. Figure 1 shows that in 2000/01, a youth in the care of Winnipeg Child and Family Services transitioning into independent living received approximately $6,847 per year, equivalent to 36% of the income required to reach the poverty line.[4]

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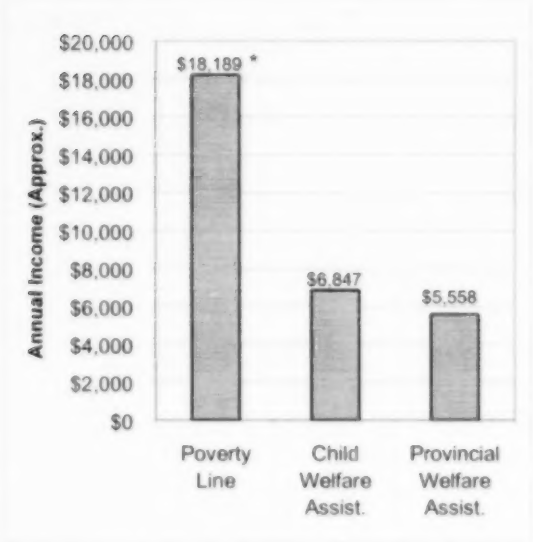
[1] Government of Manitoba (2001), Department of Family Services and Housing.
[2] Ibid.
[3] McDonald, T. et al (1996), *Assessing the Long-term Effects of Foster Care. A Research Synthesis.*
[4] Winnipeg Child and Family Services, Independent Living Program

Youth who exit Winnipeg Child and Family Services and who are unemployed are transferred to the adult welfare system where they receive financial assistance in the amount of approximately $5,558 per year, equivalent to 29% of the income needed to reach the poverty line.[5]

Figure 1: Comparison of Youth Income and the Poverty Line



* Statistics Canada (Pre-Tax) Low Income Cut-Off, 2000

Employment

There are no outcome studies in Manitoba that track the employment or poverty rates of former youth in care. It is known however, that "youth unemployment rates seriously affect youth transition to independence".[6] As reported by Milne (2002) the Canadian unemployment rate for youth in 1996 was 18%; the unemployment rates for youth in care, however, have been found to be significantly higher.[7]

Housing

Several studies have shown a correlation between former foster care placement and future homelessness.[8] As stated by Milne (2002), all too often youth leave middle class foster homes for lifestyles below the poverty line where 70% of their income is spent on maintaining a household.[9] James and Moses (1984) as cited in McDonald found that only 35% of former youth in care live in adequate housing.[10] Inadequate housing is further exacerbated in urban settings where the cost of housing is high when compared to less populated areas.[11]

"True independence generally entails complete financial self-sufficiency, an expectation few families have for youth in our society. Are we expecting this of youth in care at too early an age?"[12]

Even though it is evident that most children that go through the Child and Family Services system are at great risk of being at a distinct disadvantage in our society, the system does not keep track of what happens to children leaving the system, or how they are affected by their experience in care.

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[5] National Council of Welfare (2002), *Welfare Incomes, 2000 and 2001.*

[6] C. Milne (2002), *Youth Transition to Independence.*

[7] C. Milne (2002), *Youth Transition to Independence.*

[8] C. Milne (2002), *Youth Transition to Independence.*

[9] Ibid.

[10] McDonald, T. et al, (1996), *Assessing the Long-term Effects of Foster Care. A Research Synthesis.*

[11] C. Milne (2002), *Youth Transition to Independence.* p.178

[12] C. Milne (2002), *Youth Transition to Independence.*, as cited in Permanency Planning in the Child Welfare System., Children in Limbo Task Force. The Sparrow Lake Alliance. Ontario, Canada, p. 174.

SUPPORT THROUGH INDEPENDENT LIVING – Is it enough?

Given the high number of youth in care who will be reaching 18, the need for comprehensive and standardized transition programs has never been more evident.

Youth who are wards of Child and Family Services and are between the ages of 16 and 18 can access the independent living program, but not all youth receive this service.

"Every kid should have a chance to get on independent living. I didn't have that chance and I couldn't go back to school because I had to get a job to support myself...It's harder to have to do it myself rather than having help."[13]

Some youth in care with Child and Family Services who are preparing for independent living receive the necessary support from foster parents and/or social workers, while others enter independent living programs provided by other community based agencies.

Supports are available for youth but these are not sufficient, and many youth do not receive the help they need to become healthy, self-sufficient adults.

[13] Voices – Manitoba's Youth in Care (2001). *Moving In, Moving On and Moving Out (Video).*

NOT SUPPORTING YOUTH MEANS EVERYONE LOSES

Everyone loses when our youth are not given the opportunities to develop their capacities. The Child and Family Services system is costly, yet we continue to let youth down by not providing what they need.

In 2000/2001, $80,067,000 [14]was spent on the Winnipeg Child and Family Services agency alone.

A recent study indicated that a high percentage of inmates in Manitoba's adult correctional system had been involved with the Child and Family Services system.[15] To maintain a system that almost guarantees we must continue to care for the same person as an adult - as a social assistance recipient, or as a prisoner, multiplies the cost.

Is it not in everyone's best interests to provide youth in the Child and Family Services system with the opportunities for education and training, and with the life skills necessary to allow them to have the chance to become healthy and independent members of our society?

[14] Government of Manitoba (2001). *Family Services & Housing 2000-2001 Annual Report*

[15] Hamilton, Perrault, Skoog, (2001) *Child Protection and Criminal Involvement: An Empirical Study.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Independent living programs that provide support to youth leaving care should be expanded to allow access to all that require such programs.

2. Child and Family Services should be encouraged and empowered to use discretion in determining at what age their services and support will be withdrawn from a young person in care. We would recommend that for some youth, services should be available until age 21.

3. In order to individually and collectively achieve success, youth should have opportunities to actively and meaningfully participate in the development of programs and in the creation of plans designed to assist youth in becoming self-sufficient.

4. In Manitoba, children and youth in care receive services from a variety of service sectors, none of which are fully integrated or coordinated to work together to ensure that youth are provided with the needed opportunities to become independent. A team approach is necessary and would require the cooperation and coordination of multiple service sectors such as Child and Family Services, Employment and Income Assistance, Education, Justice, and Health.

5. Child and Family Services should research, establish and implement best practices in the delivery of services to children, youth, and their families, including the gathering of information as to what happens to children and youth while in care and after they have left care.

6. Safe, appropriate and affordable housing should be available to youth transitioning to independent living.

Poverty Barometer is an occasional publication of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.

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